

Reformers forget education is a public investment



RESISTANCE TO new taxes, fierce devotion to local control, smaller class sizes, inadequate instruction, and individual choice are the issues that confront Americans as their children return

to school this year. Many states have already begun to experiment with alternatives to public education in order to address these concerns.

Charter schools, or publicly-funded schools based on small class sizes, teacher accountability and a special learning interest, are in demand in cities like Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore. Private and parochial schools are becoming more accessible as families discouraged by the inadequacy of public education take advantage of vouchers issued by the state. For-profit corporations like Edison are making in-roads among those who want greater teacher and student accountability. Even home-schooling is popular among the religious right who believe that public education has divorced itself from their Judeo-Christian foundations.

Unfortunately, these reforms view schooling as a private good, challenging the vision of education upon which the United States was founded. That vision was based on a publicly-supported system of schools that emphasized a common curriculum and the cultivation of virtuous citizens who would, in adulthood, serve the general welfare, regardless of their social or economic status.

During the colonial era, the family, church and local community assumed the primary responsibility for the education of the young. As the 18th century unfolded, these informal modes of instruction

COMMENTARY

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gave way to institutional agencies that were divided along social and economic lines. The poor were taught in charity schools. The wealthy enjoyed private tutors, or training in a classical academy. Church-affiliated schools were attended by various ethnic and religious groups who feared interaction with those not of their own persuasion. "Diversity" — in instruction, curriculum and scheduling — was the most outstanding characteristic of these early American educational agencies. Concerned that these various schools would not adequately prepare individuals for their responsibilities as citizens of the new nation, the founding fathers created their own plans for schools organized and financed by the states.

In 1786, Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania insisted on an even "broader diffusion of knowledge" through state-supported schools in each town so every individual would exercise the "responsibilities of virtuous citizenship" in the early republic. Students would be taught a common curriculum grounded in the English language, history, mathematics, and science. Such a curriculum, according to Rush, would help to transform youngsters into "republican machines" in the larger "machinery of the state." For the founding fathers, education was a public trust that would assume the primary responsibility for creating political and moral conformity as well as disciplined behavior in the new nation.

Fierce public opposition to a general sys-

tem of common schools funded by property taxes prevented the adoption of these early proposals. Not until the 1830s was the "common school" idea realized when reformers like Horace Mann of Massachusetts, Roberts Vaux of Pennsylvania, and John Pierce of Michigan eliminated the chaos of decentralized school systems in their respective states by lobbying the legislature for sweeping educational reforms.

Among the most profound changes were a common curriculum based on the rudiments of literacy and Christian morality, a minimum school year of six months, a significant increase in state appropriations for education, increased public support, higher teacher salaries, professional training of teachers, and new teaching methods. Over the next century the common schools would evolve into today's state-supported school systems and witness their greatest success through the widespread assimilation of immigrant children into American society. In the process, public schooling inspired the widely-held belief that education is not a private good, but rather a public investment.

While it is true today that individuals can benefit from a quality education by leading more fulfilling lives and securing a lucrative position in the workforce, it is also true that society benefits from preparing students to meet their civic and economic responsibilities.

Unfortunately, in their haste to honor diversity, the politicians, businessmen and self-styled "reformers" who determine educational policy in this country today seem to have forgotten that fact.

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T I M E S ◆ L E A D E R

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 2002

WILKES-BARRE, PA